

CALIFORNIA

OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

DENTAL ASSISTANTS

CALIFORNIA OCCUPATIONAL GUIDE - NUMBER 27
2002

INTEREST AREA
MEDICAL OR HEALTH



WHAT DOES A DENTAL ASSISTANT DO?

DENTAL ASSISTANTS are part of the dental care team that helps dentists during dental exams and treatments. The Dental Assistant gets patients ready for examination and makes sure they are as relaxed and comfortable as possible. Working chair-side, the Dental Assistant hands instruments and materials to the dentist and dries the patient's mouth with suction equipment during treatments. The Assistant may also mix filling compounds, take impressions of teeth, and provide patients with postoperative instructions.

Dental Assistants perform a variety of patient care, office, and laboratory duties. The following are the most common tasks a Dental Assistant may do:

- Prepares patient for treatment.
- Selects and hands instruments to the dentist during dental procedures.
- Sterilizes and disinfects instruments.
- Sets up instrument trays.
- Suctions the patient's mouth.
- Applies fluoride coating to teeth.
- Pours, trims, and polishes study casts.
- Examines orthodontic appliances.
- Exposes dental diagnostic X rays.
- Schedules appointments, prepares bills, and receives payment for dental services.

Registered Dental Assistants (RDA) and Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions (RDAEF), perform more complex patient care tasks under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist. The supervising dentist checks the Assistant's work before the patient leaves the office.

Registered Dental Assistants

The Registered Dental Assistant may do some of the same duties as the Dental Assistant. Some of the more complex tasks are:

- Applies bleaching agents.
- Makes and cements temporary crowns.
- Looks into the mouth with a mirror and charts dental information about lesions and missing teeth.
- Places post-extraction and periodontal dressings.
- Records medical and dental histories and vital signs of patients.

Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions

Registered Dental Assistants must complete a State Dental Examiners Board approved extended functions training program before performing more advanced patient care tasks. The RDAEF may perform some of the same duties as both Dental and Registered Dental Assistants. Some of the extended function tasks are:

- Takes impressions for orthodontic appliances and cast restorations.
- Prepares enamel for bonding.
- Applies pit and fissure sealants.

WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT?

The following skills, knowledge, and abilities are important to Dental Assistants:

- Arm-Hand Steadiness – Keeping the hand and arm steady while making an arm movement or while holding the arm and hand in one position.
- Coordination – Adjusting actions in relation to others' actions.
- Active Listening – Listening to what other people are saying and asking questions as appropriate.
- Finger Dexterity – Making precisely coordinated movements of the fingers of one or both hands to grasp, manipulate, or assemble very small objects.
- Time Management – Managing one's own time and the time of others.
- Service Orientation – Actively looking for ways to help people.
- Equipment Selection – Determining the kind of tools and equipment needed to do a job.
- Computers – Knowing how to use a variety of software packages.

WHAT'S THE WORK ENVIRONMENT?

Dental Assistants work in pleasant, well-lighted dental offices and clinics. The position requires some walking, standing, standing from a seated position, and reaching for instruments. In today's modern dental offices, Assistants generally sit next to the patient.

Working with and calming nervous patients may be stressful at times. The workload may be fast paced, depending upon the patient caseload of the dental practice. Also, Dental Assistants may be exposed to possible hazards from minor infections and illnesses. However, the risks are reduced when proper safety procedures are followed and protective garments are worn, such as gloves, face shield or mask, gown, and lead shields for Assistants handling X ray equipment.

Union Membership

To date, there has been little or no unionization of Dental Assistants.

WHAT'S THE CALIFORNIA JOB OUTLOOK?

The following information is from the occupational projections produced by the Employment Development Department's Labor Market Information Division:

Estimated number of workers in 1998:	32,900
Estimated number of workers in 2008:	47,100
Projected Growth 1998-2008:	43.2%
Est. openings due to separations by 2008:	6,100
<i>These figures do not include self-employment.</i>	

The projected growth rate of 43.2 percent indicates that Dental Assistant occupations are growing much faster than average compared with all California occupations.

Trends

Future employment opportunities will increase, driven by the growth of an aging population more prone to gum disease and related dental health conditions. Another factor contributing to the high demand for dental services is that people are keeping their natural teeth longer.

WHAT DOES THE JOB PAY?

California Earnings

Dental Assistants 2001 Wages

Hourly wages range from	\$12.08	to	\$17.94
Average hourly wage	\$15.11		
Average annual wage	\$31,420		

Source: Occupational Employment Survey of Employers by EDD/LMID

Wages vary widely depending upon experience, education, ability, type of employer, and geographical location. Licensed Registered Dental Assistants and Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions may expect to receive higher wages.

Hours

Some Dental Assistants work part time; however, most work a 32 to 40-hour workweek. Sometimes, Saturday or evening work is required.

Benefits

Most dental practices offer full-time Dental Assistants vacation and sick leave. Other benefits may include medical, dental, vision, life insurance, and/or retirement plans. Generally, part-time Assistants receive fewer benefits. However, some part-time employees receive medical and dental insurance and vacation.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THE JOB?

Education and Training

Some dentists are willing to train Assistants on the job. However, many employers prefer to hire Dental Assistants who have completed a State Board approved Dental Assistant training program. Trade and technical schools and community colleges offer Dental Assistant programs. Most technical schools offer one-year training programs that lead to a certificate or diploma. Community colleges offer two-year programs that lead to an associate degree.

Currently, two schools offer a State Board approved program for Registered Dental Assistant in Extended Functions:

- University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
- University of California, San Francisco (UCSF)

The Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions training programs are generally offered as weekend programs that require the completion of approximately 96 course-work hours.

High school preparation courses for Dental Assistants should include biology, chemistry,

general science, health, basic mathematics, personal computer skills, and general business classes for record keeping and billing procedures.

Licensing and Certification

A State license is not required to practice as a Dental Assistant in California. However, a California State license and continuing education are required for *Registered Dental Assistants* and *Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions*.

Registered Dental Assistants (RDA): The license examination entrance requirements for Registered Dental Assistants are completion of CPR training approved by the American Red Cross or the American Heart Association and one of these options:

- Graduation from a State Board approved Dental Assistant program.
- A minimum of 18 months on-the job training as a Dental Assistant for a California State licensed dentist.

Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions (RDAEF): Registered Dental Assistants may apply to take an examination leading to a license that permits extended functions. The license examination entrance requirements for extended functions are:

- Applicant must be a Registered Dental Assistant.
- Successful completion of a State Board approved program in extended functions.
- Current CPR training approved by the American Red Cross or the American Heart Association.

The California Dental Board's Committee on Dental Auxiliaries examines and licenses RDAs and RDAEF's in California.

Continuing Education

Both Registered Dental Assistants and Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions must renew their California State license every two years and complete 25 hours of continuing education. Current CPR training approved by the American Red Cross or the American Heart Association is required.

HOW DO I FIND THE JOB?

Almost all Dental Assistants work in private dental offices and clinics. A small number work in dental schools, private and government hospitals, or State and local public health departments.

Community college job placement offices, Dental Assistant training providers, and vocational schools are excellent resources for job seekers.

Many employers recruit job applicants through newspaper advertisements. However, direct application to employers remains one of the most effective job search methods. Private dental offices are listed in the yellow pages under Dentists. California job openings can be found at various online job-listing systems including CalJOBSSM at www.caljobs.ca.gov or at America's Job Bank at www.ajb.dni.us.

For other occupational and wage information and a listing of the largest employers in any county, visit the Employment Development Department Labor Market Information Web page at www.calmis.ca.gov. Find further job search assistance from your nearest Job Service office www.edd.ca.gov/jsloc.htm or the closest One-Stop site listed on the California WorkNet site, www.sjtcc.ca.gov/sjtccweb/one-stop.

WHERE CAN THIS JOB LEAD?

Opportunities for advancement are limited without additional education. In larger offices, Dental Assistants with front office experience may advance to become office managers.

In addition, Dental Assistants may advance to Dental Hygienist after graduating from a State Board approved dental hygiene program and obtaining the required California State license.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Dental Board of California
1432 Howe Avenue, Suite 85-B
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 263-2300
www.dca.ca.gov/r_r/dentalbd.htm

California Dental Assistants Association
1127 11th Street, Suite 548
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 491-4116
Fax: (916) 444-2324
www.cdaaweb.org

American Dental Assistants Association
203 North LaSalle Street
Chicago, IL 60601-1225
(312) 541-1550
Fax: (312) 541-1496
www.dentalassistant.org

Dental Board Committee on Dental Auxiliaries
1428 Howe Ave. Suite 58
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 263-2595
Fax: (916) 263-2709
www.comda.ca.gov

The University of California, San Francisco
School of Dentistry
513 Parnassus Avenue, S-630
San Francisco, CA 94143
(415) 476-9000
www.ucsf.edu

The University of California, Los Angeles
School of Dentistry
Center for the Health Sciences
10833 Le Conte Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1668
(310) 825-7064
www.dent.ucla.edu

Employment Projections by Occupation
www.calmis.ca.gov/htmlfile/subject/occproj.htm

Employment and Wages by Occupation
[www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup\\$/OES\\$.htm](http://www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup$/OES$.htm)

RELATED OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

Dental Hygienists	No. 155
Dispensing Opticians	No. 167
Medical Secretaries	No. 177
Dental Laboratory Technicians	No. 243
Veterinary Technicians	No. 402
Medical Assistants	No. 513

OCCUPATIONAL CODE REFERENCES

SOC (*Standard Occupational Classification*)

Dental Hygienists	29-2021
Dental Assistants	31-9091
Dental Laboratory Technicians	51-9081

O*NET (*Occupational Information Network*)

Dental Hygienists	29-2021.00
Dental Assistants	31-9091.00
Dental Laboratory Technicians	51-9081.00

OES (*Occupational Employment Statistics*)

Dental Hygienists	32908
Dental Assistants	66002
Dental Laboratory Technicians, Precision	89921

DOT (*Dictionary of Occupational Titles*)

Dental Hygienist	078.361-010
Dental Assistant	079.361-018
Dental Laboratory Technician	712.381-018